

TERRI WARD, THE FRONT PORCH GENEALOGIST
GENEALOGICAL SPEAKERS GUILD INTERVIEW: MARCH 2026 Edition of SPEAK!
Full unedited Interview.

1. Where do you live, and who lives with you (significant other, kids, roommates, pets, plants, dust bunnies).

I currently reside in Central Florida, where sunshine and palm trees make it easy to keep the spirit of the front porch alive year-round. While my roots are deeply planted in Coastal Georgia, I carry that front porch with me wherever I go. It's less a physical structure and more a state of mind; a welcoming space for stories, memory, laughter, and thoughtful conversation. At home, I care for my remarkable 92-year-old mother, which is both a gift and a sacred responsibility. Our home has always been a place where family gathers, stories flow freely, and ancestors are remembered often.

2. Where did you grow up?

I was raised primarily in Germany as a military dependent and spent most of my primary education abroad. Growing up in Europe, surrounded by history, preserved architecture, multilingual communities, and a deep reverence for the past profoundly shaped how I see the world.

That international upbringing later led me to earn a B.A. in Foreign Language with a minor in Latin American Studies from the University of Central Florida. Today, that training helps me navigate historical records, language nuance, and the cultural context necessary for genealogical research. Though my research heart belongs to Coastal Georgia, my worldview was shaped abroad, and I believe that combination gives me both roots and range.

3. When/how did you become interested in genealogy?

My interest in genealogy began long before I knew the word for it. As a curious ten-year-old, I spent family visits to McIntosh County, Georgia interviewing elderly relatives on sunny front porches. I asked endless questions about the oldest ancestors anyone could remember, and I carefully recorded their stories on index cards.

Those conversations eventually led me to libraries, archives, and repositories where I began aligning oral history with documented records. What started as childhood curiosity evolved into a life's mission. Genealogy, for me, is not a hobby. It is legacy work. It is memory work. It is truth-telling. —And it all started on a front porch.

4. Who has influenced you most on your genealogy journey?

My earliest and most profound influence was my father, who grew up in McIntosh County during the years shaped by segregation and coastal isolation. Despite the hardships of that era, he always spoke of home and family with pride and reverence.

I was also deeply influenced by relatives such as my granduncle Arthur DeVerger and my cousin Mary Dawley Moran, a revered Gullah Geechee matriarch of Harris Neck. Their storytelling preserved family memory and reinforced the power of oral history. Professionally, advanced training through programs such as IGHR, MAAGI, and the coaching provided by the James Worris Moore Leadership Academy has strengthened my research methodology and broadened my perspective on genealogical leadership.

5. Do you have a geographic or ethnic specialty?

Yes. My work focuses on McIntosh County and the Georgia Low Country, with a particular focus on African American families, Free People of Color, Gullah Geechee communities, and the complex intersections between enslaved families and the planter class.

Over several decades I have developed a database documenting more than 75,000 individuals connected to Coastal Georgia, including descendants of Sapelo Island's 44 families, Butler Island Plantation, and Harris Neck. My work combines oral history, archival documentation, and genetic genealogy to reconstruct family narratives disrupted by slavery and historical erasure. My guiding principle is simple: "Right the Record, as well as Write the Record."

6. When did you begin speaking?

In many ways, I have been speaking all my life, first sharing discoveries with relatives gathered on living room couches and front porches. My formal speaking began through family reunions in the early 2000s, where I served as historian, event planner, and presenter. From there, invitations expanded to community programs, genealogical conferences, and national audiences. Speaking evolved naturally from research. When you uncover stories long buried in the archives, there is a deep responsibility to share them.

8. Did you have a mentor when you began speaking? Have you been a mentor for another speaker?

While I did not begin with one formal speaking mentor, I was deeply shaped by community audiences who held me accountable to both accuracy and clarity. In many ways, they were my first critics and greatest teachers. One of the most meaningful influences on my speaking journey was the late Emma Davis Hamilton, affectionately known as "Empress Emma." After I participated in a conference in Charleston, she invited me to present for AAHGS Metro Atlanta, and she became one of my earliest advocates. Emma had a gift for recognizing potential in others and encouraging them to grow. Her leadership reminded many of us that rigorous research must also remain rooted in community.

12. Do you have an interesting "speaking" story or tip to share? Perhaps a "lesson learned."

One of my earliest reunion presentations taught me an unforgettable lesson. I had prepared an extensive and meticulously documented history of the Moran line, stretching back centuries. When I finished presenting, however, the room fell completely silent. No applause. No questions. Just relatives looking at one another, bewildered.

I realized that while the research was accurate, I had failed to connect it to the personal and cherished memories of my audience. That experience reshaped my approach entirely. I learned that genealogy is not simply moving backward through generations and recovering names; it concerns anchoring people in familiar ground before guiding them into the deeper history.

13. What has been your most unique speaking assignment?

One of the most unique and meaningful speaking assignments I have undertaken was providing historical context for a day-long walking tour and bus program focused on Butler Island and Hampton Plantation, —properties associated with Pierce Mease Butler and immortalized by his wife, Fanny Kemble, in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839*.

The program centered on the March 1859 “Weeping Time” slave sale, one of the largest recorded sales of enslaved people in American history. Participants toured both plantation sites alongside a professional archaeologist, while I shared documented histories of the enslaved families whose lives were shaped there. During the luncheon keynote for the Georgia Historical Society, I emphasized the generational impact of those events on Coastal Georgia families whose stories continue today. It was a powerful reminder that historical landscapes are not static. They hold memory. When we speak about them responsibly, we help restore humanity to those too often reduced to footnotes.

17. Do you have a website? What is the URL? Do you write a blog? What is the URL?

Yes. My website www.frontporchgenealogist.com, is under construction. It will be where I share information about my research, presentations, and ongoing projects related to Coastal Georgia and African American genealogy. While much of my work has historically been presented through lectures, newsletters, and educational programs, I am continuing to expand my written content and digital resources. The Front Porch Genealogist will become a research platform and a gathering space. —A place where documented history and community memory dance and meet.

19. What is something unique about you that you’d like to share with other GSG members? Any other closing thoughts?

I do not see genealogy as separate from daily life. The “Front Porch” is a way of life and a philosophy. I do genealogy every day, in every way! It represents gathering, listening, documenting, correcting, laughing, debating, remembering, and sometimes sitting quietly with hard truths.

Because I was raised abroad, yet rooted in Southern soil, I work comfortably between the archive and the porch, between story and structure, and between documentation and memory. That balance defines my work. When we “Right the Record, as well as Write the Record,” we are not just preserving history. We are shaping how it is remembered.

Thanks for reading! GSG Members may see the final interview posted in the March edition of SPEAK!